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# Lighting Two Worlds as One: A Variation of Moises Kaufman's "33 Variations"

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Lighting Two Worlds as One:  
A Variation of Moises Kaufman's  
*33 Variations*

Lighting Two Worlds as One:  
A Variation of Moises Kaufman's  
*33 Variations*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Drama

By

Diana Renee Kaiser  
Ball State University  
Bachelor of Science in Theatre Design and Technology, 2010

May 2013  
University of Arkansas

## Abstract

In partial fulfillment of a Master of Fine Arts degree, this thesis will document the lighting design process for Moises Kaufman's *33 Variations*, performed at the University of Arkansas in October, 2012. The paper will illustrate the collaborative approach taken by the design team in developing this production. Also this paper will discuss the close work and collaboration between the light and sound designs, and specifically, the choices made in the technical rehearsals.

This paper will attempt to answer the question: How do you bridge the gap between time and space making one cohesive world, provide various locations, and support the emotional arc of the characters with the use of light? I will begin with a brief analysis of the play, provide an account of the design development, and end with a self evaluation of the process and the final product.

This thesis is approved for recommendation  
to the Graduate Council.

Thesis Director:

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Dr. Andrew Gibbs

Thesis Committee:

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Prof. Les Wade

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Prof. Michael Riha

## Thesis Duplication Release

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the faculty of the Drama Department-- my teachers, my mentors, my advisors, my colleagues, and my friends. For the past three years, you have pushed me and challenged me to be the best artist I can be. Thanks especially to Dr. Gibbs for always being my support and biggest cheerleader. I could not have made it through without you.

I would also like to thank my fellow students. Thank you to the undergraduates for inspiring me and allowing me to mentor you. To my fellow grads; you have made the last three years incredible. Thanks for the never-ending support, the healthy competition, and the many, many laughs (many). You have not only shaped me as an artist but as a person; I will be forever grateful. You are always in my heart.



## Dedication

To my family. Without your undying support, I would have never gone further than drawing whales.

To Jen Landreth. You believed in me before I believed in myself. Your voice got me here. I miss you everyday and I can't wait until we can one day, in that pub in the sky, have a beer and laugh again.

## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Play Analysis	
Characters	2
Themes	5
Design Concept and Process	
Design Meetings and Development	6
Technical Process	8
Sound and Light Collaboration	10
Reflection	
Self Evaluation	12
Conclusion	12
Works Cited	14
Appendices	
A. Sketches	16
B. Production Photos	18
C. Light Plot	26

## Introduction

Designing the lights for *33 Variations* was a challenging and rewarding experience. As a designer, I was challenged to stretch not only artistically but also as a collaborator and a technician. Because of the unique structure of the play, and the importance of music throughout, the sound designer (Will Eubanks) and I worked very closely together to create the flow of the piece. It was also beneficial to work closely with our scenic designer and projection designer (Ashley Harman) in not only creating the physical environments of the play but also integrating the two technologies: lights and projected images. Before this project, I had never worked so intimately with my fellow designers on creating such cohesive moments. It was a true study in collaboration.

## Play Analysis

*33 Variations* is a play that follows the lives and deterioration of two people who lived for music: Dr. Katherine Brandt and Ludwig Van Beethoven. Beethoven, a composer in the early 19th century, began to lose his hearing and good health while desperately trying to finish his variations on Diabelli's Waltz. Dr. Brandt suffers from ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis), also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease, and she is desperately trying to finish her monograph on Beethoven's 33 variations of Diabelli's Waltz. The play takes place in 1819, 1823, and present day in Vienna, Austria, Bonn, Germany and New York City, New York.

Dr. Katherine Brandt is a musicologist specializing in Ludwig Van Beethoven's work. She has procured a grant to write a monograph focusing on why Beethoven spent so much of the last years of his life obsessed with composing variations on a waltz written by Anton Diabelli that was perceived by many scholars to be musically "insignificant". Katherine approaches her work with decisive focus; she strives for perfection and holds those who excel in their chosen field in high regard. Katherine, as a scholar, finds her passion in her work and finds it difficult to connect to the present world. She is in awe of the emotion and intellect behind music, but she finds it hard to show her own emotions, which makes it difficult for her and her daughter, Clara, to connect. Shortly after her diagnosis, Katherine travels to Bonn, Germany to study Beethoven's sketches in order to help her finish her work before she succumbs to the disease.

Clara Brandt, Katherine's daughter, is a bit of a free spirit. She is a costume designer who used to be a singer, then a painter, and now wants to change career track again to become a scenic designer. She is curious about the world and everything it has to offer, so she learns a craft and moves on to another one instead of becoming an authority in one area. Because of this

variability, Katherine perceives her daughter as mediocre and floundering. Clara is spending more and more time with her mother because of Katherine's illness. Their relationship begins tense and stiff, almost cold, not unlike the symptoms of ALS. ALS causes the patient to lose the ability to control voluntary muscle movement. ALS requires a lot of touching, someone to help move the body, which creates a level of perceived intimacy. Clara becomes that person, which forces Katherine and Clara to become more intimate than they ever have before. By the end of the play, Katherine begins to see the strength in her daughter and they are able to connect both physically and emotionally before Katherine's death.

Mike Clark, a nurse, is funny, charismatic, caring and compassionate. He first meets the Brandts by examining Katherine before her trip to Bonn. Later, he meets Clara at a computer repair store and the two begin to date. Mike becomes her sounding board with her concerns for her mother, as well as being her rock and support through the ordeal. Mike goes with Clara to Bonn when she decides that she must go there to help her mother, whether Katherine wants her there or not.

Dr. Gertrude Ladenburger, a librarian at the Beethoven-Haus in Bonn, Germany, appears to be a severe, reserved, cold person when we first meet her. She takes her guardianship over Beethoven's papers very seriously, and Katherine has to prove that she is worthy of studying them to gain Gertie's trust. They soon bond over their mutual love and passion for Beethoven's work and become good friends. Katherine also connects with Gertie after having learned that Gertie's aunt died of ALS; Gertie understands what she is going through. Gertie becomes a great support not only for Katherine but also for Clara as she cares for her mother. We learn that Gertie, through candor, honesty, and good humor, is a warm and loving friend.

Ludwig Van Beethoven, a brilliant music composer, parallels Katherine in his focus and passion for his work. He is stubborn and pig-headed, caring only for composing and rebuking the social niceties of the day. He receives an invitation to compose variations on a waltz and, at first, scoffs at the notion. However, as much as he tries to reject it, he cannot get the waltz out of his head and decides to take on this interesting musical challenge. While Diabelli wanted just one variation, Beethoven continues to produce variation after variation, insisting that the waltz has more to give. His obsession grows as his health deteriorates. By 1823 he has completely lost his hearing. He is, however, able to finish 33 variations before he eventually dies.

Anton Diabelli, a music publisher in Vienna, Austria, composes a waltz that he is very proud of. Being the shrewd business man that he is, in an effort to market his waltz, he invites several of the top composers of the time to compose one variation on the waltz. All the variations would be published in one compilation. Diabelli is frivolous, a bit like a strutting peacock. He loves music and worships at the feet of the great composers. He worries and frets, pushing Beethoven to relinquish the variations he has composed several times. All the while Beethoven insists he is not finished. Upon seeing some of the sketches Beethoven has produced, Diabelli allows the master to continue working. When he finally publishes the 33 variations, he declares them “the best set of variations ever written!”

Anton Schindler, Beethoven’s secretary and closest confidant, believes so strongly in the work that Beethoven produces that he devotes his life to making Beethoven comfortable so that he can work. Schindler negotiates his contracts, cleans, looks after him when he is sick, handles his finances, negotiates Beethoven’s social indiscretions, and so on. Schindler is stiff and precise. He follows “rules” to the “T”. He is Beethoven’s polar opposite.

Reoccurring themes throughout the play include: mediocrity verses genius, physical intimacy, failing health and racing time, and the effects of music on the human soul. Katherine constantly refers to her daughter and Diabelli's waltz as mediocre, while praising Beethoven for his genius. Schindler, claims Diabelli's waltz to be insignificant and mediocre, not understanding why Beethoven is wasting his time with it; however he sees the work that Beethoven is producing inspired by the waltz as pure genius. Though Katherine and Clara are very uncomfortable with the idea at first, Katherine's illness requires them to touch and be intimate-- first with Clara helping her mother with physical therapy, and then by coming to terms with Katherine's death.

As Beethoven and Katherine face their own mortality in a race against time, they become increasingly frustrated with their ever weakening bodies as they struggle to complete their work. Beethoven has no patience for people and gets irritated with society. He yells and ostracizes anyone who "gets in his way," but when he is composing music it is as if he is seeing heaven. His soul is fed by the discovery of melodic combinations. Even when he cannot hear anymore, he feels the music in his soul and does not stop. He works until the day he dies. Katherine approaches her work in the same fashion. After her diagnosis, she doesn't miss a beat. She wants to spend the last days of her life working and studying; she finds it absurd that Clara would suggest she do anything else. When she hears music, especially Beethoven's music, its like she is lifted to a higher place. She forgets her illness and relishes the genius in front of her. Even after she can no longer write for herself, she dictates her work to Gertie. She also works until the day she dies.

## Design Concept and Process

We first met as a production team in the Spring of 2012. Director Amy Herzberg, Professor of Acting and Musical Theatre at the University of Arkansas, led our first meeting by sharing her ideas and impressions from reading the script. She talked about how she really believed that each scene should flow from one to the other, how the music would connect the two worlds (present day and the past). She spoke about how she wanted to show the two worlds progressively throughout the play becoming integrated with each other. One metaphor that she used that stuck out for me was this image of two worlds swirling and converging into one cohesive entity (and that the music motivated this convergence). We discussed how important it was going to be to closely integrate the scenic, sound, and lighting elements to create this fluidity. After our initial meeting, we all (lighting, sound, scenic, and costume designers) began our own exploration of the script and what we got from it. Ashley Harman began sketching and providing Amy with many options for the physical world of the play (Appendix A). I began to collect research images, images that I thought illustrated the ideas and themes I got from the script. I also looked for inspiring images for color and texture that I could draw ideas from.

*33 Variations* is a unique play with many locations. Not only does the action take place in two different time periods, but on two continents and in three cities. Within those three cities there are many different locations: a hospital waiting room, a MRI machine, a lecture hall, a computer store, an airplane, a field, a train station, a library lobby, an elevator, a library basement, a bedroom, a cafe, just to name a few. The unique thing about this script is that as far as locations go it reads a lot like a screen play, which creates challenges for live theatre. Because of this we relied heavily on the lights to suggest the different locations. Over the course of the



summer and during early portion of the fall, I had several conversations with Ashley Harman, a third-year Scene Design MFA candidate and our scenic designer, about what the environment should be for the world we were creating. Ashley had many great ideas about creating a space that would not only be metaphorically sound for the emotions and challenges the characters of the play faced, but would also be easily transformed into the many different locations the play called for. We both were drawn to images of old parchment and crumbling plaster walls. Both symbolize the deterioration that Beethoven and Katherine experience. Ashley came up with the idea of using three tall, curving walls that mirrored Amy's fluid/swirling concept while they closed in around the characters. These walls not only represented the concepts we were going for, they also created great surfaces for Ashley's to projected images. With this open space and simple pieces of furniture on wheels, Amy was able to block the scenes where she wanted and I defined each of those spaces with lighting choices.

Since the set was not a literal representation of any single location, I relied heavily on watching rehearsals to see where each scene was placed. This was advantageous because while Amy was blocking some scenes, she would turn to me and say "Will this work? Do you have a better place for this moment to happen?" These questions would lead to a theoretical discussion regarding specific lighting looks, which aided in our process once we moved into the technical rehearsals. I wasn't used to being asked my opinion about blocking, and it was a great experience to be able to be so collaborative in the early rehearsals. I also think for some key moments, these early conversations helped us create something really beautiful. For instance, I remember at the end of Act I, Amy was having trouble deciding exactly how she wanted the blocking to happen there and she turned to me and asked what I thought. I said, "Oh, wouldn't it be nice if Katherine

and Beethoven landed at the end in the communication spots so we could have this nice tableau at the end with the two of them in specials?” Amy said “okay thats a good idea”. She was able to work back from there, and she created this lovely blocking pattern that ended the way I suggested; it ended up being one of my favorite moments in the play.

Producing and designing *33 Variations* provides a lot of technical challenges. As discussed earlier, this show calls for several different times and locations, both indoors and outdoors. Due to budget, space, equipment, and time constraints I had to rely on cueing and level setting to help me differentiate each location. Also, because of how tall the walls were and their placement on stage, I was limited on where I could place equipment. This helped in my decision to go simple technically and get creative with light levels. Because space was so tight, it forced me to really consider what equipment I needed to light each scene, what lights could I repeatedly use, how often I would need a certain special, etc. Thinking about it in this manner forced me to approach the initial draftings in a whole new way.

Usually, when I first begin to draft a light plot, I decide what kind of washes I will need, how many lights for each wash, and then fit in specials where and if I need them. This is the way I first began to draft this design. I quickly realized I was not satisfied with the work I was creating. I felt that I had too many instruments physically but yet not enough to get the job done. I threw out five different completed draftings until I decided to “throw out my rule book” and approach it in another way. Because of the abstract way we were approaching this production, I knew that I wanted to use several specials. I used the specials to isolate the actors and to separate individual areas of the stage. Amy and I had discussed having what we called “the communication specials.” There were two spots, one down stage left and one down stage right

that anytime someone read a letter or was on the phone or sent an e-mail, they stood in one of those spots. I also needed a special for Katherine's lecture, the airplane, the elevator, the MRI, the hospital bed, Katherine and Beethoven's death specials, and the archive table. After I had the specials drawn where they needed to be, I filled in the rest of the drafting with washes that would be necessary to properly light each scene. The light plot turned out to be relatively simple with minimal equipment in the end, while still meeting all of our needs. (Appendix C)

Because of Ashley's and my original connection to the images of old parchment and crumbling plaster walls, I felt strongly that I wanted to explore the use of texture in this piece. Different textures in the light not only helped add dimension to the space, but also helped define and enhance those various locations. I used a window gobo to show Schindler had opened a shuttered window. (Appendix B, Figure 6) I used tree gobos for the outdoor scenes, some with yellow/green color to illustrate sunlight shining through leafy tree branches and some with pale lavender to illustrate moonlight streaming through trees. I used a texture in a fanning back wash that was called "woodgrain". The swirling/linear look of the pattern furthered our image of swirling, converging worlds. I used it to accent a few other scenes but I wanted it particularly for the MRI scene, to simulate the flashes described in the script. (Appendix B, Figure 1) I also put some gobos in gobo rotators that projected on the three walls so that I could subtly simulate the "music" appearing on the walls and coming to life-- almost making it look like the walls were breathing, again, reenforcing the idea of the swirling/converging worlds. There is also a club scene written into the script, where Mike and Clara go out dancing on a date. A night club in New York is a very different location than any of the other scenes in the play so I knew I needed something separate that was distinct for that moment. I decided to put a six foot tall pipe on

wheels, creating a rover, that had three lights on it with neon-green, pink, and yellow gels that got pushed onstage, and I programmed the lights to chase along with the beat of the music being played.

Along with the technical aspects of designing the show, I also had the challenge of learning how to program and effectively use a new light board. Our department recently purchased an ETC Ion light board which is a digital programming board. Prior to this show, I had very little experience using this type of light board but was excited to get the opportunity to use the latest in lighting technology for this production.

Once we got into the technical rehearsals, Will Eubanks, the sound designer, and I began to work very closely together. Music is such an integral element in this play, moving and guiding the action from one scene to the next. Will and I worked meticulously to get the timing of the lights and sound to mesh well and move together through each transition. Because of how crucial it was that everything work together, Will and I decided to use the program “Cue Lab” to link the sound and light boards together through MIDI control. Cue Lab allows us to create one cue list for both designs so that we could program one cue to fire a light and sound cue at once. Or fire one cue, wait a programmed amount of time and then fire the other if for some reason we needed a light cue followed very closely by a sound cue and visa versa. This allows for one operator and one “go” button and a lot less “called” cues for the stage manager.

It was a wonderful experience working so closely with Will during that tech week. We were able to bounce ideas off of each other. For example, after 1st dress we both had some notes we wanted to work out. After everyone else went home we went through the scenes we both wanted to work on and I would say, “Hey Will, will you look at this and let me know what you

think.” and he would watch the stage and let me know if the timing I had would work with the music cue he was working on and then we would play both cues together. He would also every now and then ask me to take a listen to something he was working on and I would let him know what I thought as well. It was a very symbiotic relationship and very rewarding.

## Reflection

Overall, I would say that working on this production of *33 Variations* was both the most challenging and most rewarding design experience I have had yet. I learned to stretch and challenge myself by approaching the show in a new way, thinking of new ways to solve issues technically. I learned how to use different equipment, specifically the ETC Ion light board and the Cue Lab program, and I collaborated with fellow designers on a level that I had not done before.

I think that if I could go back and do anything different, I would have pushed for more one-on-one meetings with Amy in the early stages of the design process, as well as meetings with Ashley and Amy about the projections. The projections were not explored fully until we got into tech week and we quickly realized that some of them were not going to work the way we had hoped. Amy, Will, Ashley, and I sat down after Saturday's tech rehearsal and it was pretty unanimous that we needed to explore alternatives to create one effect that was meant to be created with a projection. After that, Will, Ashley, and I put our heads together and come up with an idea that was, in my opinion, much better and more cohesive than the original idea. Not only did we use projection for that moment but we integrated a lighting effect as well as a sound effect, all of which worked so well together. I am glad that we had that revelation and that we came up with what we did, but I think that if we had sat down as a group prior to that day and hashed out what we were planning, scrambling to fix it late in the game could have been avoided.

I would consider the work that we did on this production a success. I believe that we were able to come together as a design team and create a cohesive world in which both present-day

Katherine and historical Beethoven could live and work together. The work we did on this production reaffirms for me why I do the work that I do. This is a collaborative, group effort striving for one cohesive work of art. That is what live theatre is all about, taking risks and working together.

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- Kaiser, Diana Renee. *Production Photo: Variation: "Baseball"*. Sept. 2012. Photo Call. Fayetteville, AR.
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- Kaiser, Diana Renee. *Production Photo: Variation: "Fugue"*. Sept. 2012. Photo Call. Fayetteville, AR.
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- Kaiser, Diana Renee. *Production Photo: Variation: "Classical Music"*. Sept. 2012. Photo Call. Fayetteville, AR.
- Kaiser, Diana Renee. *Production Photo: Variation: "Intimacy"*. Sept. 2012. Photo Call. Fayetteville, AR.
- Kaiser, Diana Renee. *Production Photo: Variation: "Variation #33" A*. Sept. 2012. Photo Call. Fayetteville, AR.
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- Kaiser, Diana Renee. *Production Photo: Variation: "The Conversation Notebooks"*. Sept. 2012. Photo Call. Fayetteville, AR.
- Kaiser, Diana Renee. *Production Photo: Variation: "Variation #33" C*. Sept. 2012. Photo Call. Fayetteville, AR.



Kaiser, Diana Renee. *Production Photo: Variation: "Research"*. Sept. 2012. Photo Call. Fayetteville, AR.

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## Appendix A

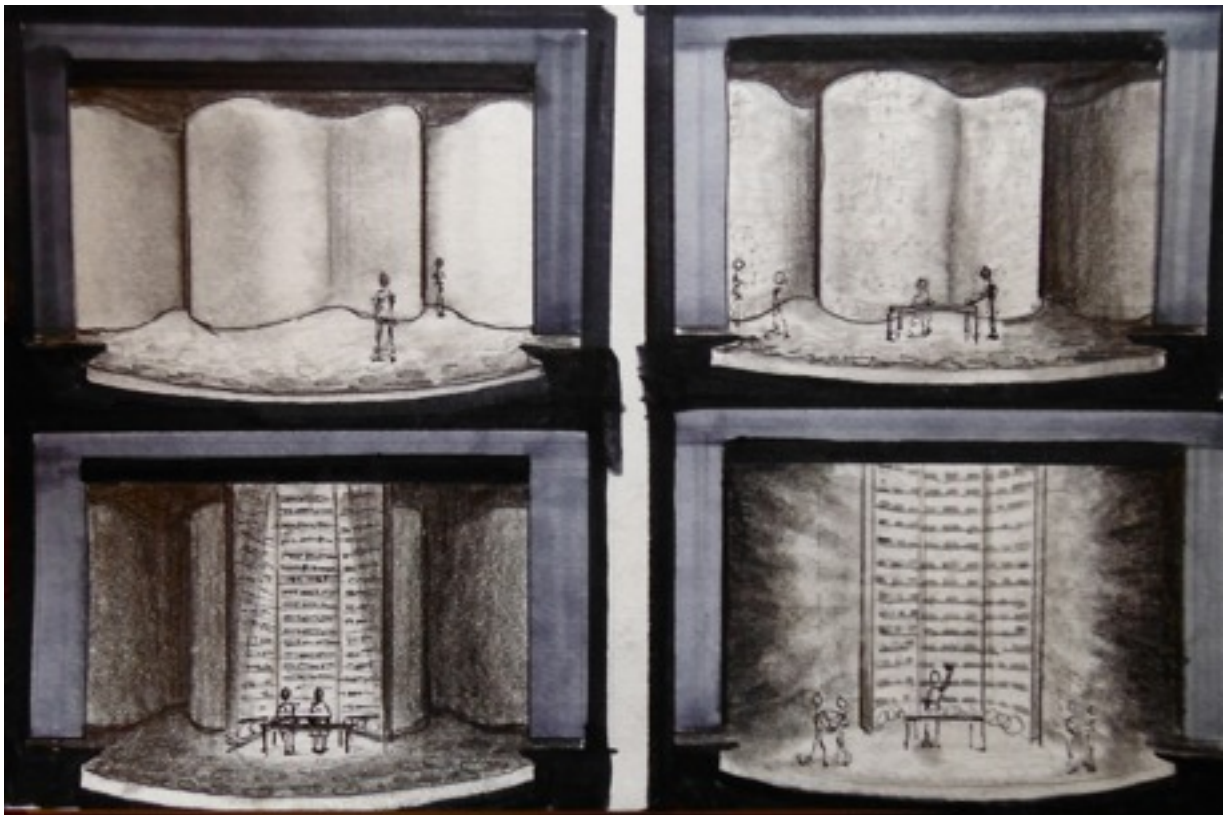


Figure 1. Preliminary Scenic Design Sketches, drawn by: Ashley Harman



Figure 2. Final Scenic Design Rendering, drawn by: Ashley Harman

## Appendix B



Figure 1. Production Photo: Variation: “Exam”, photo taken by: Diana Renee Kaiser



Figure 2. Production Photo: Variation: “Limbo”, photo taken by: Diana Renee Kaiser



Figure 3. Production Photo: Variation: “Baseball”, photo taken by: Diana Renee Kaiser



Figure 4. Production Photo: Variation: “Cheeseburger”, photo taken by: Diana Renee Kaiser



Figure 5. Production Photo: Variation: “Fugue”, photo taken by: Diana Renee Kaiser

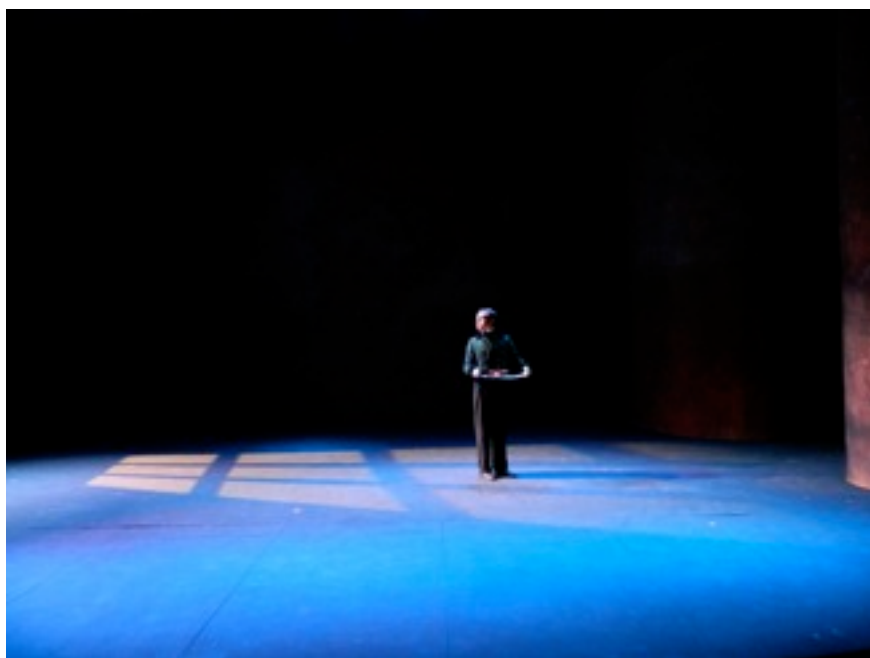


Figure 6. Production Photo: Variation: “Eavesdropping”, photo taken by: Diana Renee Kaiser





Figure 7. Production Photo: Variation: “Classical Music”, photo taken by: Diana Renee Kaiser



Figure 8. Production Photo: Variation: “Intimacy”, photo taken by: Diana Renee Kaiser



Figure 9. Production Photo: Variation: “Variation #33” A, photo taken by: Diana Renee Kaiser



Figure 10. Production Photo: Variation: “Variation #33” B, photo taken by: Diana Renee Kaiser





Figure 11. Production Photo: Variation: "The Conversation Notebooks", photo taken by: Diana Renee Kaiser



Figure 12. Production Photo: Variation: “Variation #33” C, photo taken by: Diana Renee Kaiser



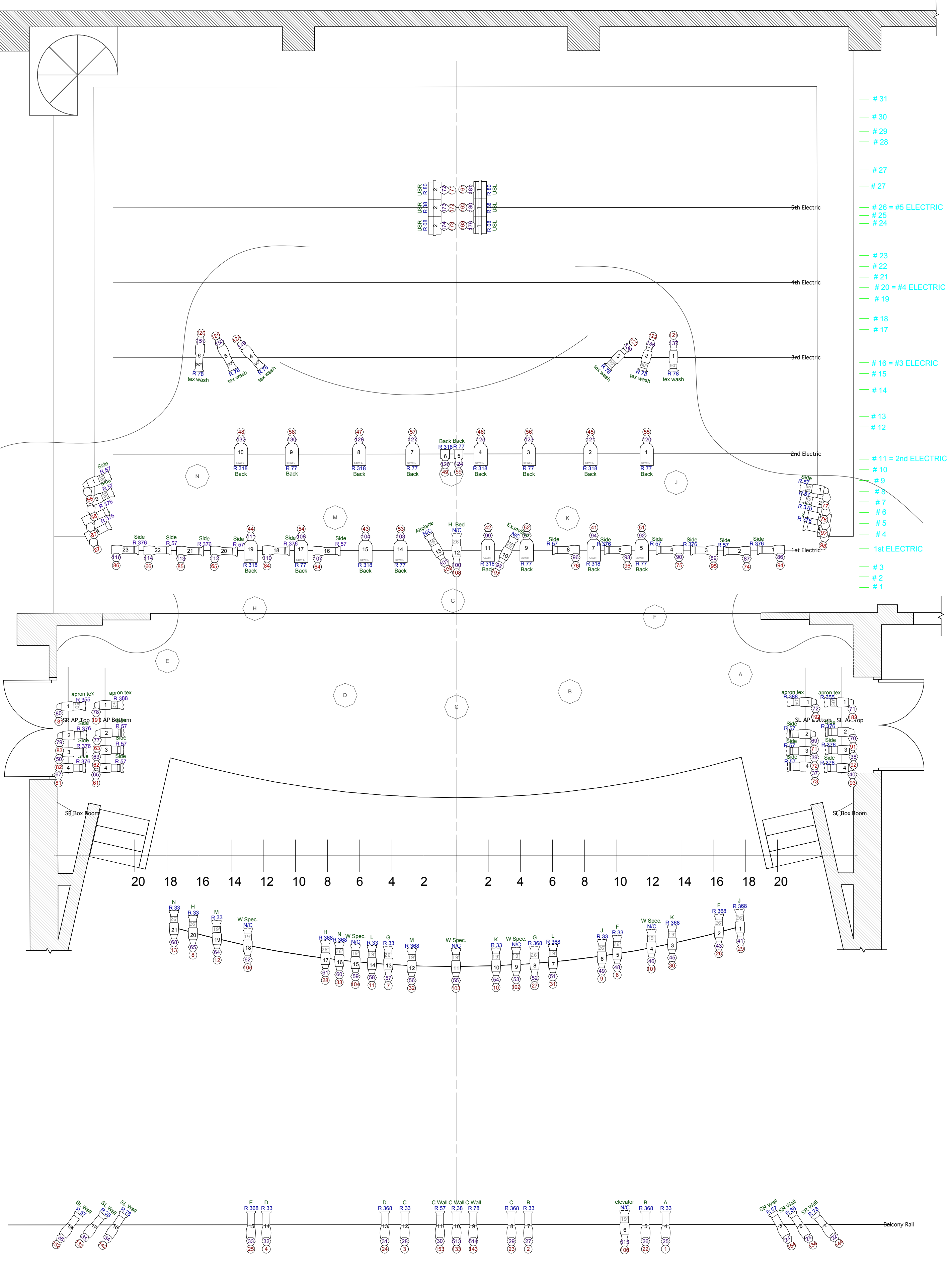
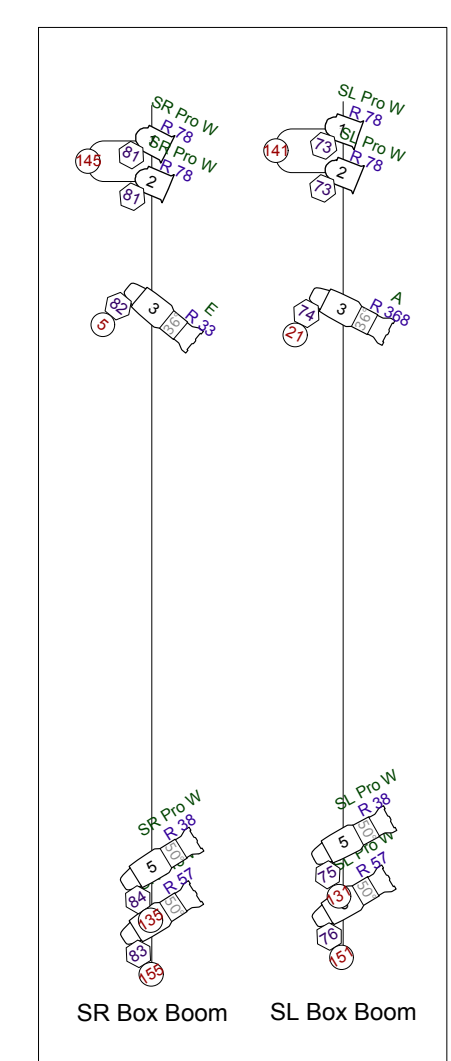
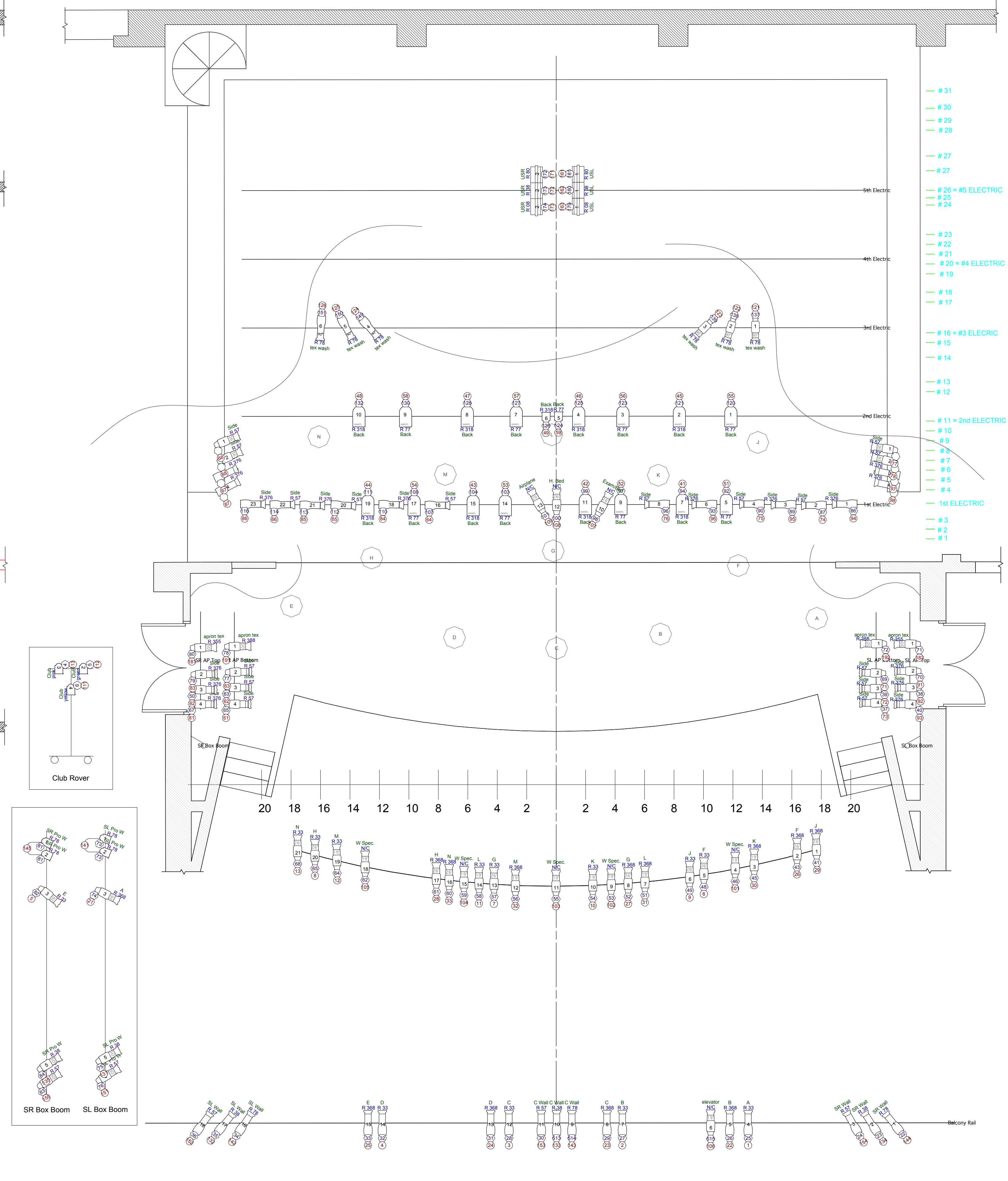
Figure 13. Production Photo: Variation: “Research”, photo taken by: Diana Renee Kaiser



Figure 14. Production Photo: Variation: “Joyful Silence”, photo taken by: Diana Renee Kaiser



Figure 15. Production Photo: Variation: “The Sketches - Part 1”, photo taken by: Diana Renee Kaiser



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1 of 1